

Beware of the Islamist Threat in Libya

In the early 1980s, the Jeane Kirkpatrick doctrine presented a dilemma facing Western democratic systems: a choice between preferring authoritarian systems and dictatorships, which were pro-Western, and totalitarian systems that were anti-Western. Today, the West is confronted with a similar no-win situation concerning different groups of terrorists in Libya.

The bizarre current scene in Derna, the coastal city of 100,000 population in East Libya, features the terrorist militants linked to al-Qaeda declaring jihad against the local terrorist group, at least 300 of whom were trained in Syria where they were connected with the al-Battar Brigade, and then sent to Libya, affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS). The war had started with the killing by masked gunmen on June 10, 2015 of a senior al-Qaeda figure, the 55-year-old Nasser Akr, after which clashes resulting in at least 20 deaths had taken place.

Akr, who had served a prison term in Britain and fought in Afghanistan, was prominent in the Shura Council of Jihadists in Derna. This group attacked the IS group for being guilty of "tyranny and criminality," and declared holy war against its members until none are left. Some of the IS militants were killed in the fighting, but so were at least two from the Shura Council, including Salem Derbi, the commander of the Abu Salem Brigade, who had hidden in the mountains for ten years while Moammar Gaddafi was in power in Libya.

The West is not really confronted with the immediate problem of which of the two terrorist groups is the lesser evil, for both political and humanitarian reasons. The choice, which is becoming increasingly clear because of the rapid rise of IS in the Middle East and elsewhere, has to be made in the context

of the political and economic chaos in Libya.

One can start with a trivia question. How many prime ministers and governments can Libya have at one time? This disintegrating, indeed failed, state is continuing to suffer civil war, with some peace truces, among different rival communities, primarily between those loyal to Islamist authority in Tripoli, and the internationally recognized government and elected parliament, the Council of Deputies, in Tobruk.

The Libyan government has the loyalty of the Libyan Army, led by General Khalifa Haftar, who had launched an offensive, Operation Dignity against Islamists, in May 2014. On the other hand, the Islamist Libya Dawn coalition of militias and Muslim Brotherhood controls the rival Islamist government of the General National Congress based in the capital, Tripoli, with its million and a quarter population. This alternative government has introduced sharia law and harsh controls in its area.

This disjointed situation, in a country with less than 6 million people, resulted from the downfall of Mu ammar Gaddafi after 42 years in power, the collapse of his security forces and his death in October in 2011, and the rise of militias armed with weapons seized from Gaddafi's store. A struggle, with violence and assassinations, ensued between the Islamists who had fought against Gaddafi on one hand, and a combination of liberals, nationalists, and tribal leaders, who were anti-Islamists on the other.

Fighting continued among armed groups, with different ideological, regional, tribal, and commercial interests. International talks to resolve the issue have failed, and heavy casualties have been caused in the continuing fighting.

Of particular significance for the United States is the Islamist Ansar al-Sharia group, the body that attacked the

U.S. Embassy on September 11, 2012 in Benghazi and murdered the Ambassador Chris Stevens. It controls the city and claims to have established an Islamic Emirate, and may have pledged allegiance to IS. It is designated a terrorist organization by the U.N., the U.S., and a number of other countries. Its logo is composed of AK-47 assault rifles, a clenched fist, an open Koran, and a black flag.

The problem for the U.S. and Europe is that the IS forces already control Sirte, the birthplace of Gaddafi, a town of 125,000, have taken the airbase south of the city and are trying to capture Misrata in West Libya. In May 2015, the ruthless IS group attempted to assassinate the accepted Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni in Tobruk.

The turmoil in the country and ruthlessness of the Islamist groups has led to the migrant crisis now troubling the EU and the Mediterranean states. The present reality is that about half a million, between 450,000 and 500,000 people are in northern Libya willing and preparing to take the deadly boats arranged by smuggling groups, to cross the Mediterranean. Western vessels, from Italy, Ireland, Britain, and Malta, are being used to rescue the would-be migrants from death in the seas.

In the year 2014, 626,000 people claimed asylum in Europe. Italy brought 170,000 on boats to its ports. Calculations suggest that about 3,000 attempt to cross every day, and a considerable number die in the effort. So far in 2015, 76,000 have reached Europe, of whom 40,000 remain in Italy.

The European Union is confronted with a number of problems. The immediate one concerns the humanitarian effort to rescue the migrants. Accompanying it is the logistical one of distributing them fairly among the EU's 28 countries, on the basis of population and economic strength. Germany has the problem that a disproportionate number, 200,000, want to remain in its country, whereas Croatia has only 450. Above

all, the European countries must consider whether the large influx of migrants might be deleterious for stability in their societies.

The most serious issue for both the U.S. and Europe is the political reality that the IS forces are now only 200 miles from Europe, the first Islamist enclave on the border of North Africa. The Islamist threat already exists in a number of African countries, Mali, Nigeria, southern Algeria, and Mauritania. In their own interests, the Western democracies have an obligation to see that it goes no farther.

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